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Note to editor: The following is a My Turn Column from Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard.

(Phoenix, Ariz. – March 12, 2007) The Internet continues to explode in popularity among young people. More and more teens every day keep in touch through instant messaging, social networking sites (such as myspace.com) and cell phones text messaging. Unfortunately, this electronic forum has not only given sexual predators unprecedented access to our children, it has become a new, incredibly potent and potentially toxic, method of spreading schoolyard gossip, hateful statements, lies, threats and harassment.

Cyberbullying is highly varied and hard to define. At its core it is the sending or posting derogatory or hateful material on the Internet with the intent to harm another. Cyberbullying can be defamatory to a group, a team, a race or target a single victim. Bullies employ any or all cyber communications including posts to social networking sites, chat rooms, email, instant messaging and blogs to harass, threaten, spread lies or distribute embarrassing pictures. The Internet gives bullies a worldwide audience for taunting their victims while maintaining some anonymity.

Cyberbullying is no joke. Because of the vast reach of the Internet, it has far greater impact and can cause much more emotional damage than the same statements scrawled in alleys or on bathroom walls in a previous generation. Damaging words and pictures are nearly impossible to remove once they have been posted online. Cyberbullying messages often contain threats of violence which can be criminal in themselves. The sad truth is that violent threats and inflammatory statements in cyberspace can turn into real world attacks. In one of many incidents provoked by cyber statements, last October, a racist flier posted on myspace.com sparked a fight between a white student and several Native American students at Westwood High School in Mesa.

To promote safe use of the Internet, I strongly encourage teens and parents to discuss what is going on online. After visiting many Arizona middle schools, I am convinced that cyberbullying is a rapidly growing problem, infecting almost every school in our State. My Internet Safety presentation now includes a short video about cyberbullying called "You can't take it back." This video demonstrates how cyberbullying can tear apart friends and even the bully's own family. Parents and teachers can find this and other videos at www.netsmartz.org. NetSmartz was created by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to provide resources on how to use the Internet safely.

I hope the following tips help parents and teachers protect our children from cyberbullying:

- Talk to your kids about what they are doing on the Internet, what sites they visit and who they chat with.
- Keep a record of any rude and harassing emails messages or postings your child receives, but do not let your child respond to them.
- File a complaint with your Internet Service Provider (ISP) or cell phone company about any cyberbullying messages.
- If the cyberbully attends the same school as your child, inform administrators and school resource officers.
- If the cyberbullying involves threats of violence, coercion or intimidation, call the police.
- If you discover a Web site that is defaming or mocking your child, contact your ISP and inform police to get the Web site removed.

For more information about how to use the Internet safely and wisely, please visit the Attorney General's Web site at www.azag.gov.